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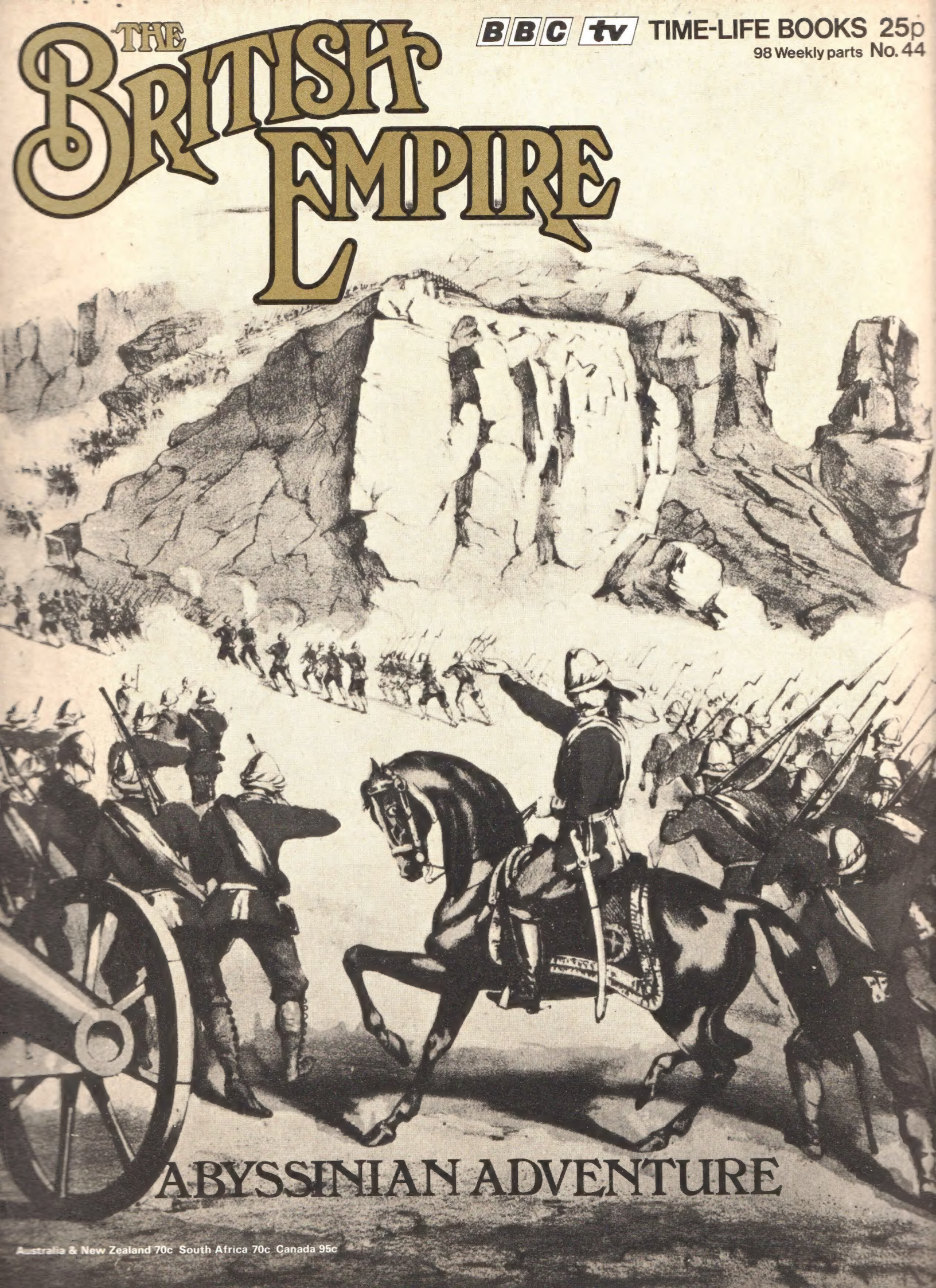

ABYSSINIAN ADVENTURE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: (*t*=top; *b*=bottom; *l*=left; *r*=right; *c*=centre). Cover and page 1217: Radio Times Hulton Picture Library. Inside back cover: National Maritime Museum, London. Haile Selassie I University, Addis Ababa 1232; Trustees of the British Museum 1207*t*, 1210, 1212, 1224*t*; Foreign and Commonwealth Office Library 1208/9, 1218/19*t*, 1226*t*, 1230; *Illustrated London News* 1214*b*, 1215, 1218*bl*, 1219*br*, 1221*b*, 1222*bl*, 1227*t*, 1227*b*; *Judy* 1206; The Mansell Collection 1220*b*, 1222/3*t*, 1223, 1225*t*, 1226*b*; Radio Times Hulton Picture Library 1207*c*, 1207*b*, 1213, 1214*t*, 1219*tr*, 1221*t*, 1224*b*, 1225*b*, 1228, 1231; Institution of Royal Engineers, Chatham 1211*t*, 1211*b*, 1220*t*, 1229; United Service and Royal Aero Club 1205 (detail). PHOTOGRAPHERS: Peter Davey 1212; John Reader 1232; Eileen Tweedy cover, 1205, 1206, 1207*t*, 1208/9, 1210, 1211, 1214*b*, 1215, 1217, 1218/19 (except 1219*tr*), 1220*t*, 1221*b*, 1224*t*, 1226*t*, 1227*b*, 1229, 1230, inside back cover. MAP: David Nash.

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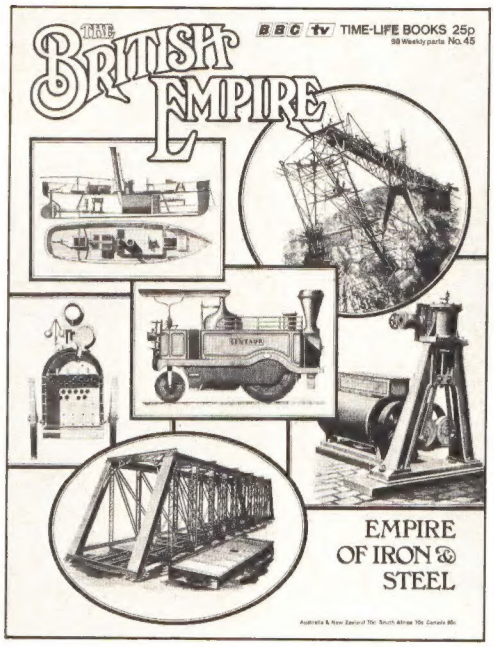
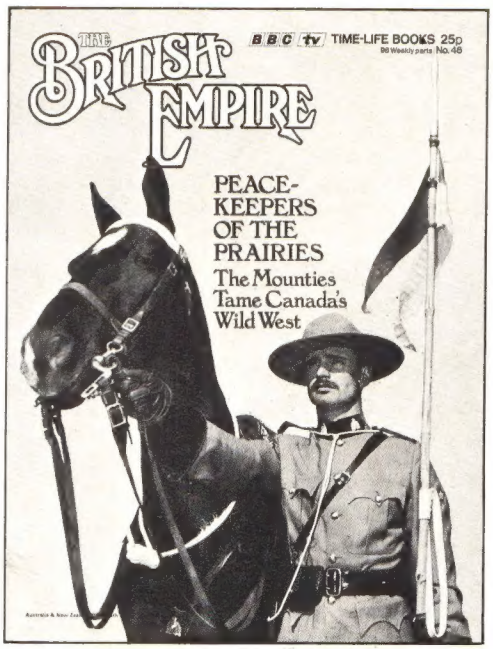
Published by Time-Life International (Nederland) N.V. in co-operation with the British Broadcasting Corporation.

Distributed in the U.K. by Time-Life International Ltd. and BBC Publications.

Printed in England by Jarrold and Sons Ltd. Norwich.





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To rescue a British consul and other European captives enchained in the mountain castle of the half-civilized Emperor of Abyssinia, Britain launched a full-scale military invasion. With the news stories of a dozen top war correspondents flooding in, it attracted all the publicity of an adventure story come true.

1217. Picture Essay: The Road to Magdala

The course of the campaign described, with illustrations of the rusty railway from Bombay, Theodore's giant mortar and the actions that hit the headlines.

1228. II. The Conquering Hero

Napier became a Victorian hero, and his victory turned into an exercise in national self-congratulation.

Cover: The order is given to storm the rock fortress of Magdala, mountain redoubt of the Abyssinian Emperor, Theodore. Two Victoria Crosses were won in this action of 1868.

ABYSSINIAN ADVENTURE

Sir Robert Napier rose to fame as commander of the Abyssinian expedition.

In 1863, the Foreign Office, either through embarrassment or inefficiency, ignored a letter from the brutal, bibulous Emperor Theodore of Abyssinia. Incensed, Theodore imprisoned the British consul and several other Europeans by way of revenge. He accomplished in addition his own downfall. The British, recently humiliated by the Mutiny in India and defeat in the Crimean War, now showed that the lion's tail could not be tweaked with impunity after all. A massive rescue campaign was mounted under the methodical and dignified Sir Robert Napier. It was a brilliant success: with no thought of annexing the country, Napier rescued the prisoners, humbled Abyssinia, and withdrew in safety, honour satisfied.

By David Chandler

The safety and happiness of expatriates living abroad has always been a problem for their home governments. What should be done if they are imprisoned, robbed, tortured or killed? Nowadays the answer is that nothing can be done beyond diplomatic protest, for direct military action would raise an international outcry. But in the mid-19th Century this was not so. At the height of her power Britain could protect or avenge her citizens almost anywhere outside Europe if she chose to.

The question was when military action was warranted. Not to act would damage British prestige, which depended on a general belief in the Queen's power to protect her subjects. On the other hand, strong military action would arouse a storm of humanitarian criticism and cost large sums of money. Worse, it might add unwanted regions to the Empire.

The Abyssinian expedition of 1868, sent to save two minor diplomatic representatives and 58 other European hostages imprisoned by the half-mad Emperor, was one of those rare occasions when Victorian Britain decided that honour and prestige justified military action despite its cost. The action had two special features: it was extraordinarily successful, unlike the expedition sent to save General Gordon in 1884; and it did not, as similar expeditions would probably have done 20 years later, add one square mile to the British Empire.

By any standards it was a major undertaking. No less than 13,000 British and Indian combat troops and a total of 291 vessels of all sizes were employed, besides a host of servants and workmen, and over 36,000 animals. From the day the first troops set foot in Africa, it took nine months to reach the mountain fortress of Magdala, release the prisoners held there and evacuate the expedition. This was a full-scale military campaign, and although the loss of life was miraculously slight, the financial cost was enormous: £8,600,000.

This astronomical figure caused a parliamentary uproar, but, said Disraeli, who was then in power, "money is not to be considered in such matters," and in many ways it was well spent. The expedition was a complete success and it provided a convincing demonstration of the martial power and resources of the British Empire at a time when British prestige was at low ebb as a result of the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny. Consequently, it did a great deal to re-establish the reputation of Queen Victoria's British and native troops in the eyes of Europe and the world.

Despite the military fanfare of the rescue operation, the British government was not motivated primarily by imperialistic or jingoistic aims. As one of the official historians, Captain Henry Hozier, accurately described it, the expedition was inspired "by no thirst for glory, by no lust for conquest." The most persuasive advocate of direct action, Colonel William Merewether, the Political Agent in Aden, may, it is true, have had longer-term ambitions for a British role in the horn of Africa. Nevertheless, the decision to use troops was only reached after every other form of persuasion – even discreet bribery in the form of gifts – had failed to free the captives. And by then, negotiations had dragged on for more than three and a half years. For it was back in 1864, on January 4, that the Emperor Theodore, villain of the piece, provided the cause for the invasion by throwing Her Britannic Majesty's Consul, Captain Cameron, into chains.

In the years of his prime, Theodore was an imposing figure. Dark skinned, five feet eight inches tall, well proportioned and endowed with a naturally dignified bearing, he was every inch a ruler. He was also a most complex personality: a combination of robber-chieftain, idealist and madman. Periods of great courtesy and generosity frequently gave place to fits of insensate rage. Deep religious convictions contrasted with a complete disregard for human life and suffering.

Although he claimed direct descent

A cartoon of 1868 shows Theodore about to devour a glowing cannon-ball seasoned with fiery Indian pickles – a reference to the powerful artillery and Indian troops that were on their way to end his reign.

from the illegitimate offspring of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, Theodore, born in 1818, was in fact named Liz Kassa and was the son of a minor Abyssinian nobleman living in the province of Kouara. Educated by Coptic monks, Liz Kassa eventually succeeded an uncle as provincial governor. He was soon in revolt against his immediate overlord, and over a period of years gradually carved and intrigued his way to a position of paramount authority over the assortment of semi-feudal states and petty princedoms that made up the main part of mid-19th-Century Abyssinia.

In 1855, now aged 37, he felt strong enough to have himself crowned "Emperor Theodore III, King of Ethiopia, King of Kings and the Chosen of God" by the *abuna* (or primate) of the Coptic Church. Still his territorial ambitions remained unsatisfied, and he soon turned to the conquest of the remaining unsubdued portions of Ethiopia and waged a series of wars against neighbouring Muslim tribes.

As a ruler, Theodore was inspired by two ambitious dreams. In the first place he saw himself as the pre-ordained champion of Christianity, whose destiny would be to defeat and destroy all his Muslim neighbours and then lead a great crusade to liberate Jerusalem from the Turk. Secondly, as a means to this end, he realized the need to modernize his backward country. In the 1840s he made enlightened efforts to push forward social and political reforms, introducing a number of skilled European workmen and technicians into his country. In those hopeful years, restrained and supported by his adored wife Tavaritch, he drew much advice from an Englishman named Walter Plowden, who had been appointed the first British consul in 1842.

Unfortunately, lasting success proved elusive. Soon his reforms ran into conservative opposition from the superstitious and semi-feudal Ethiopian chiefs and people. His country erupted into bitter civil conflict. Revolt after revolt broke out against Theodore's rule. In one of these in 1860, his trusted adviser Plowden was murdered. A second disaster was the death of the Empress, who had served as a moderating influence. These sudden catastrophes seem to have affected Theodore's reason, for soon afterwards the highly unstable and utterly tyrannical sides of his paradoxical personality became dominant. A second marriage provided no solace, and soon the Emperor "devoted himself to mistresses and intoxication," as the official historians of the Abyssinian expedition put it. Endless wars engaged almost all his attention, and little by little his power began to decline.

It was to the court of this changed Theodore that Lord Palmerston's government decided to send out a new consul, Captain Charles Cameron, an ex-officer of the Indian Army. Cameron first met Theodore in February, 1862. The gifts he presented to the Emperor of Abyssinia in Queen Victoria's name – particularly a fine pair of engraved pistols – proved most acceptable.

The Emperor lost little time in sending a letter of thanks to the Queen, and announced in it his intention of sending an Abyssinian delegation to visit London. He requested a guarantee of safe conduct through hostile neighbouring territories for his representatives. "I wish to have an answer by Consul Cameron," the letter concluded, "and that he may conduct my embassy to England."

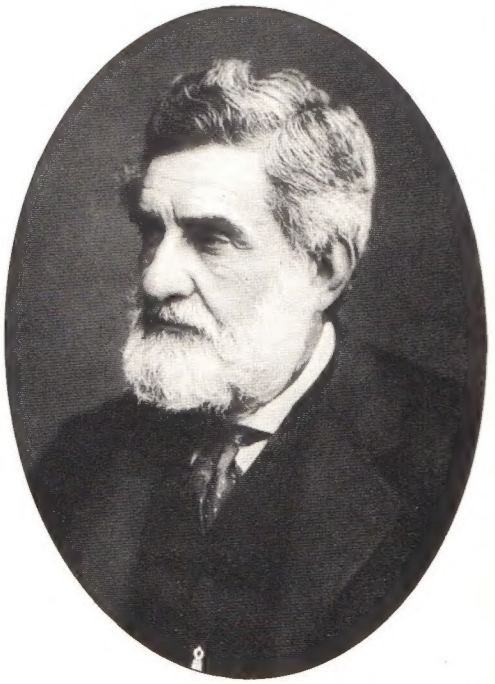
Unfortunately, an oversight on the part of the Foreign Office caused this missive to be overlooked, and not even a formal acknowledgement was returned. As month after month passed with no reply from the Queen, Theodore's resentment and suspicions rapidly mounted. His fevered imagination began to imagine a deliberate slight – even a British-backed conspiracy against him.

The final straw came in November, 1863, when an assistant for the consul reached Abyssinia – but without the long-awaited royal reply. Theodore's suspicions turned into paranoic rage. In the new year of 1864 he ordered the detention of Cameron and his staff. This gave him little satisfaction: every European in Abyssinia appeared to represent danger, and in the weeks that followed Cameron's arrest a considerable number of innocent missionaries and their families were rounded up and imprisoned. Some of the missionaries were cruelly tortured and Cameron himself was kept in chains.

The worst torment of captivity, however, was the knowledge that the future

Emperor Theodore of Abyssinia reacted to a British snub by gaoling the British consul.

Charles Cameron was the consul whom the half-mad Emperor seized and then tortured.



Hormuzd Rassam, a diplomat from Aden, tried to rescue Cameron, but was jailed too.

depended on the unpredictable whims of a half-demented tyrant. Each day might hold torture and death – or alternatively the arrival of some gift from the inconsistent Theodore who oscillated wildly between benevolence and severity.

It took some little time for news of these developments to reach London through Aden, and even when the situation was appreciated, the Foreign Office refused to regard the matter as more than a temporary misunderstanding. In due course, however, it was decided to send a formal reply to Theodore's original long-neglected letter – with more gifts – and include in it a polite request for the release of the captives. The delivery of this document was entrusted to an Iraqi named Hormuzd Rassam – a member of the British Political Agent's staff at Aden.

Rassam was in no hurry, and it was not until January, 1866 – almost two years later! – that his letter was in Theodore's hands. The Emperor, beset as always by local rebellions, expressed his satisfaction with the content of the reply – and the accompanying gifts – but it was not until April that he agreed to free the captives. Nevertheless, it seemed to Rassam that his mission had been successful.

Rassam's self-congratulation proved tragically over-optimistic. Theodore's tortuous mind suddenly veered again, and on his orders the freed missionaries and consular officials were intercepted on their way to the coast. During a farewell audience, Rassam himself and his party were also seized.

Theodore now sent a new message to Queen Victoria by one of the missionaries, a Mr. Flad. In this he thanked her for the latest consignment of gracious gifts, and did not fail to indicate that further donations would be very welcome – in particular a number of skilled workmen, various types of machinery and an expert manufacturer of ammunition. Mr. Flad reached London on July 10, 1866, and shortly thereafter a slightly apprehensive Whitehall came to realize that Theodore's cunning had been underestimated. The ruler of Abyssinia was impudently blackmailing the British Empire. But the Tory Ministry of Lord Derby and Mr. Disraeli, which had come to power on July 6, was in no position to take immediate retaliatory action. Popular agitation for electoral reform and a serious outbreak of cattle plague were absorbing all their attention at home, so the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Stanley, decided to comply with Theodore's demands and return yet another pacific reply.

Flad returned to Abyssinia in December, to find that Theodore had transferred most of his captives to the isolated rock fortress of Magdala which, under the prevalent conditions of declining power, the Emperor was coming to regard as both his capital and refuge. The Emperor again expressed his pleasure at the content of Lord Stanley's letter – but gave no sign of any intention of freeing his prisoners immediately. He merely indicated that the workmen and other gifts should be sent into Abyssinia without delay.

This insolent reply at last elicited a sterner reaction from London. The Foreign Office first stopped the workmen leaving for Abyssinia and then dispatched a formal note of protest, dated April 16, 1867. Still Theodore remained intractable, and soon all communication between the Abyssinian court and Whitehall had broken down.

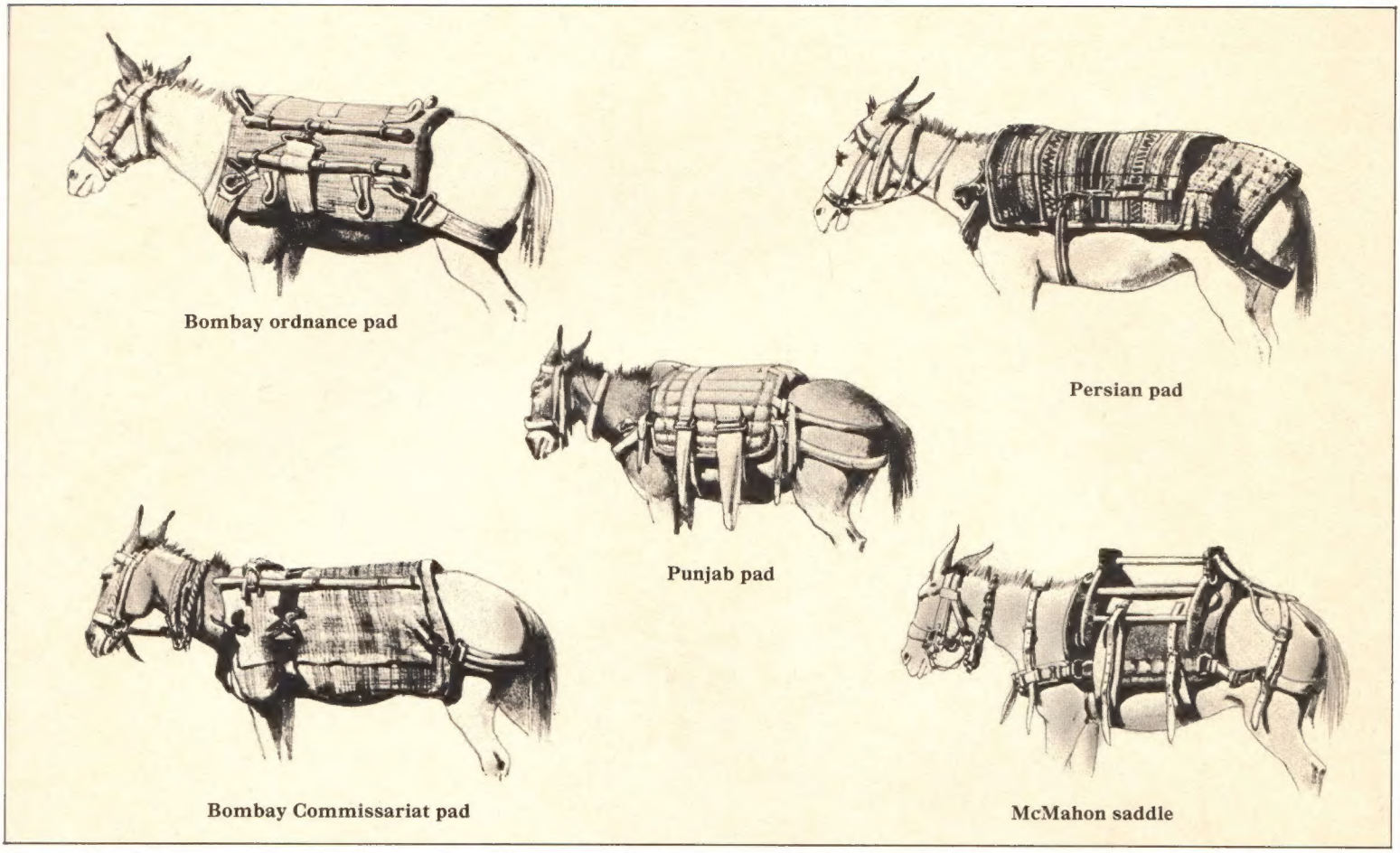
As its hands were now freer of home crises – popular agitation subsided when Disraeli introduced a very radical Reform Bill – the government cautiously began to entertain the idea of direct intervention. There was still, however, a notable reluctance to take binding decisions, in view of the fact that very little was known about Abyssinia. Apart from a handful of intrepid explorers, missionaries and traders, scarcely anyone had visited the interior of the mountainous country. Nobody was sure whether the country could support an expeditionary force – nor what geographical and climatic difficulties the troops would face.

Abyssinia was inaccessible. The Suez Canal was not yet open, so it would not be feasible to send troops from Great Britain direct. Aden's port and water facilities were inadequate for the support of a major force. Therefore it was clear that any rescue operation would have to be mounted from India, with a specially constructed base area somewhere on the east coast of Africa. It was a complex problem – but underlying every objection to direct action were considerations of cost and fears of humiliating failure.

Nevertheless, it was soon clear that the problem would have to be tackled. Awkward questions were being asked and the public was becoming increasingly indignant. Accordingly, in June, 1867 the Cabinet began to collect information about the sort of operation that would be required. It soon became evident that any expedition would best be mounted from the Presidency of Bombay, the largest naval station in British India. It had plentiful resources of both supplies and shipping, and its army was in cantonments conveniently close by. Its British units had recent experience of frontier fighting conditions; the native components were considered loyal and capable, while in the person of the local Commander-in-Chief, Sir Robert Napier, the Bombay government possessed an experienced and distinguished soldier. And so, on July 10, the Secretary of State for India telegraphed the question how soon – *if* an expedition were determined upon – a force could be ready to start.

The "Devil's Staircase" Pass at Suru, which dwarfed the British troops (centre background), was typical of the harsh terrain along the line of the British advance.

FROM THE EGYPTIAN ENCLAVE round Massawa and Zula, where Napier and his troops landed, the journey to Magdala was 400 miles – long, tortuous, thirsty miles through unknown country, with a mad Emperor walled up in a rocky fortress at the far end. And then 400, equally exhausting miles back. Even without defeating the Emperor, to take a large army there and back safely was a military victory in itself.



The British tried a variety of mule saddles and pads for transporting equipment across Abyssinia, but most gave nothing but trouble.

For two weeks Sir Robert studied every available book and record pertaining to Abyssinia with the assistance of his Quartermaster-General, Colonel Phayre, and drew up a carefully considered appreciation which was transmitted to London on July 23.

In Sir Robert's opinion, any expedition would have to be landed near Massawa on Egyptian territory, and a large base established. The distance from Massawa to Magdala was estimated at 400 miles. An intermediate base would have to be established about 200 miles inland near Antalo. The General advised that no less than 12,000 combat troops, a large number of servants, and vast amounts of stores and baggage animals would be required, as well as mountain artillery, tents, blankets, groundsheets and enough currency to make local purchases and secure the co-operation of the local inhabitants. Preparations would take three months.

This appreciation caused not a few raised eyebrows in Whitehall. The expense would be immense. Could it be justified? Was so comprehensive an expedition really necessary? Would not a "flying column" of about 2,000 men be enough for a lightning dash to Magdala and back?

From the start Sir Robert strenuously resisted all suggestions of a reduction in size, and stressed the necessity for the daunting expenses he had recommended. "It is to be hoped that the captives may be released by the diplomatists at any cost of money," he wrote to the Duke of Cambridge on July 25, "for the expedition would be very expensive and troublesome, and if not a hostile shot is fired the casualties from climate and accident will amount to ten times the number of the captives. Still, if these poor people are murdered, or detained, I suppose we must do something."

After digesting this information for a month, the British Cabinet finally decided on intervention, placing Napier in command of the expeditionary force.

Robert Cornelis Napier was a tall, well-built and dignified man of 56. "His face was remarkable for the kindliness of the blue eyes, the genuine gentleness of the countenance lit up by them and the smile that continually played around his lips," recorded H.M. Stanley, the famous American newspaper correspondent who reported on the campaign for the *New York Times*. "To all Sir Robert was extremely bland, affable and kind; sometimes there lurked in his tone something akin to sarcastic *politesse*, and at such times he was more plausibly phrased than ever." Born in Ceylon in 1810, the son of a gunnery officer, he had spent 30 years in India, making his career in the Engineers. During the Indian Mutiny of 1857 he distinguished himself at the siege of Lucknow and was appointed Brigadier-General and awarded the K.C.B. After serving in China in the Second Opium War of 1860, he was made Commander-in-Chief of the Bombay Army with the rank of Lieutenant-General.

Thus Sir Robert Napier was a soldier of no mean operational or administrative experience when he was chosen to lead the expedition to Abyssinia, although it was the first time an engineer had been selected for such an appointment. His variegated career had taught him three main lessons which he now strove to apply to his new task. First, the paramount importance of a properly organized and equipped commissariat, especially when operating in largely unknown terrain. Second, the advisability of retaining

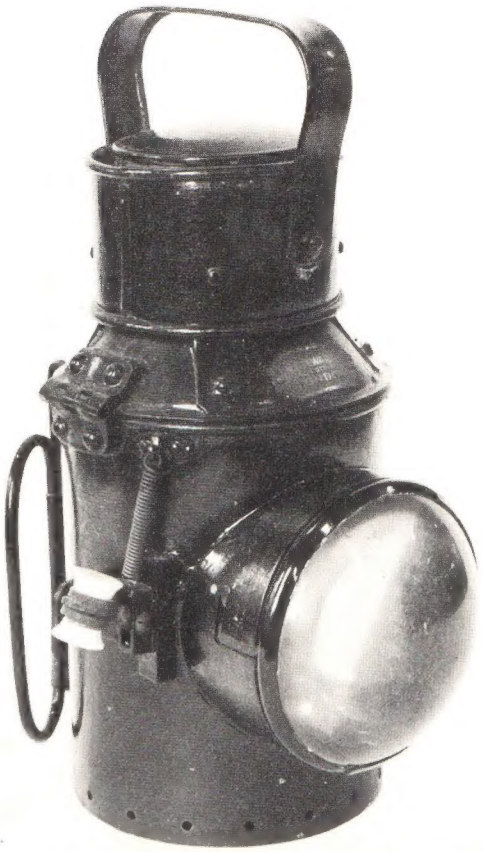
as free a hand as possible over the conduct of the expedition as a whole – especially on the political side. And third, the need to resist all pressures to mount ill-advised, hasty operations.

Napier faced formidable operational problems. The complete lack of good roads – and the extremely precipitous nature of much of the terrain – would inevitably impede the 400-mile advance to Magdala from the coast; transport and supply difficulties would be immense. Then there were problems of climate and health. Thirdly, there would be the difficulty of catching Theodore. If he chose to abandon Magdala without a struggle and wage a guerrilla war, the British forces would face an almost insoluble problem. And lastly there was the need to consider the fate of the prisoners: any ill-considered move might result in their immediate execution.

Political and administrative difficulties bedevilled the organizers from the outset. On the very day that the expedition was confirmed, Napier was writing to the Governor of Bombay that the Viceroy's proposal to place an all-powerful political officer alongside the commander would not be acceptable. An acrimonious dispute followed, but the General had not the least intention of playing second fiddle to a political officer appointed by the Viceroy, Lord John Lawrence. He found his case supported by the Duke of Cambridge at home, and in the end the soldiers won their way. The final decisions would rest with Napier alone.

Relations with the Viceroy's government were not improved by this victory. Thereafter the central Indian government did its best to interfere with the choice of officers and units for the campaign. "I quite understand that the Home Government has left everything in your hands," wrote the Viceroy rather acidly on August 25, "and therefore everything which has been said must be treated as mere suggestions on our part. We all think, however. . . ." – such was the tone of many a supposedly "helpful" communication.

There were differences of opinion over every possible issue. Napier's plans were criticized and his competence queried; his requirement for 20,000 baggage-animals was declared impossible; the reliability of his Bombay native regiments



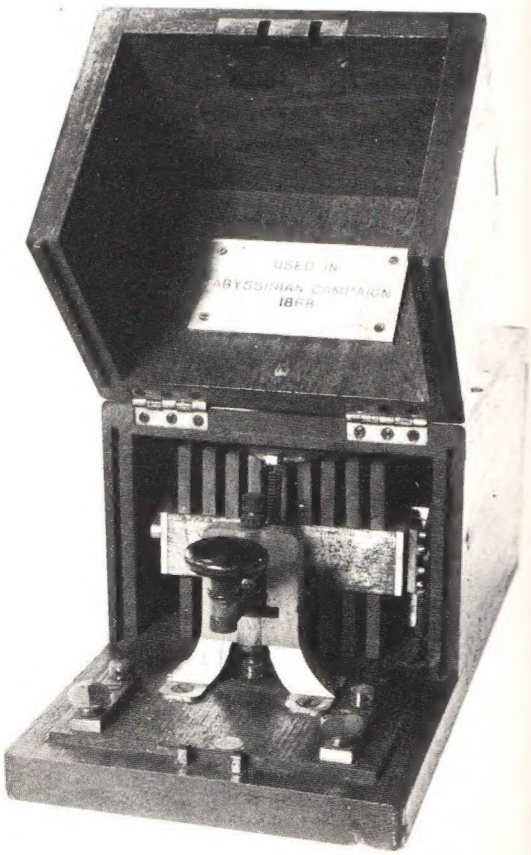
With oil-fired signalling lamps, like this one with a spring-operated shutter, British troops kept in contact with each other on night patrol in the mountains.

was questioned. The Viceroy also chose to challenge the suitability of Napier's second in command, Sir Charles Staveley, although he had originally put forward his nomination. "I make no apology to you for interfering in this way," ran a pompous viceregal letter of September 25; "the safety of the Army and the honour of England are involved in this matter." Napier, however, refused to surrender one tittle of his prerogatives, and the home government backed him over almost every issue.

Stage by stage preparations went steadily forward. The home government spared no pains. The Foreign Office secured Egyptian permission for a temporary base on their territory, and sent its representatives scouring Spain and the Middle East for baggage-animals. Negotiations were concluded with Vienna for the special minting of half a million Maria Theresa thalers of 1780 – the only currency universally accepted throughout Abyssinia.

The Admiralty undertook the lighting and buoying of the approaches to Massawa, provided three hospital ships and vessels specially converted for shipping animals and agreed to supply three condensers to produce fresh water. The War and Ordnance departments allocated to the expedition two batteries of 7-pounder mountain guns with a thousand rounds apiece, a battery of 12-pounder, breech-loading, rifled Armstrong guns of the latest pattern, and four "rocket machines" supplied with 340 6-pounder "Hale's War Rockets." Also sent out from Britain were 4,000 Snider-Enfield breech-loading rifles for the European troops, the latest types of tube-wells and chain-pumps, a number of specialist officers and the newly formed 10th Company, Royal Engineers, a team of nine photographers and an electric telegraph unit, supplied with sufficient equipment for laying up to 450 miles of line. A complete railway – locomotives, lines and rolling-stock – was sent from Bombay. There were interpreters and experienced travellers (including a gigantic, colourful captain, named Charles Speedy, from New Zealand), a geographer, an archeologist, a zoologist, newspaper reporters and 13 foreign military observers. In every way the Victorian talent for thoroughness was amply displayed.

In India, meanwhile, preparations had been going ahead. On November 11, after months of remonstration, the detailed composition of the force was announced. There were to be four British and ten



Telegraph transmitters like this sent messages along the 200-mile line that ran up from the coast as far as Antalo, which was the halfway camp on the trail to Magdala.

native infantry battalions, a squadron of British cavalry and four regiments of native horse, five batteries of artillery, a rocket brigade (eventually manned by the Naval Brigade), and a total of eight companies of sappers and miners – comprising one British and seven native units. In round terms this constituted a fighting force of 4,000 Europeans and 9,000 native troops. Over 7,000 camp-followers accompanied these units to perform menial domestic tasks.

This was not a small force. But the size of the commissary to keep it supplied was enough to dismay even Napier. The Commissariat Department had forced upon him a staggering number of men and animals: no less than 14,500 native personnel, 3,000 horses, 16,000 mules and ponies, 8,000 camels, 4,000 pack and 1,000 draught bullocks, and 44 elephants. The separate Land Transport and Bengal Coolie Corps increased the number of natives by a further 2,000. To convey the troops and the supply and land transport service corps, 205 sailing vessels and 75 steamers were hired at a cost of £449,000 per month and 11 small craft purchased.

It was an army of extremes. On the one hand, the European troops were armed with modern weapons and supported by miracles of modern science such as the railway, the field-telegraph, the water-condensers and the very latest types of well-boring equipment. On the other hand, the Indian troops were still equipped with smooth-bore, muzzle-loading muskets which had changed little since the 18th Century. Some of the troops were clad in the newfangled khaki uniforms; others still wore the traditional red coats of Waterloo and the Crimea. Old and new were inextricably and strangely entangled with one another.

While all these arrangements were being pressed ahead in Britain and India, a reconnaissance party was on its way to Massawa to commence surveys. Massawa was found to be inadequate, but in due course a practicable disembarkation point was discovered near the village of Zula. In October, 1867, the first convoy of shipping set sail from Bombay. On arrival, several officers and parties of cavalry then explored inland, seeking for the best place to penetrate the mountains and reach the Abyssinian highlands.

Then, on October 21, the advance guard of the expeditionary force anchored in Annesley Bay off Zula. The first ship-loads carried mainly sappers and their materials, and very soon work had begun on piers for landing men and materials, a railway and camp sites. Gradually the Zula base began to take shape. By mid-December 2,000 British and 5,500 native troops were accommodated ashore, with 5,000 mules and ponies, almost 2,000 camels, 962 bullocks and 956 carts besides a host of followers and labourers. In the process of building up the quantity of supplies required, 5,000 tons of provisions had so far been landed, including six million pounds of forage for the animals.

Everything did not always go smoothly at Zula, however. The governor of the Egyptian enclave in which Zula lay showed no inclination to provide practical assistance, serious indiscipline developed among the native labourers and, pending the arrival of the condensers, local fresh-water resources proved incapable of providing the minimum ration of one and a half gallons per man each day or of watering all the animals. The prospect would have been grim, had it not been for a daily delivery of 120 tons of water that was shipped ashore from the steamships in the bay. As it was, many animals died of thirst and plague, and the roads around the Zula base were soon littered with stinking carcasses. Not surprisingly morale soon began to sink.

The Austrian Maria Theresa thaler, long famed for the purity of its silver, was the only currency universally accepted in Abyssinia. For everyday needs, Britain ordered half a million from Vienna.

When Sir Charles Staveley arrived to take over command on December 6, affairs took a turn for the better. The Egyptian government was induced to appoint a more helpful local governor, the dead animals were buried, comprehensive health regulations enforced and the water supply more closely controlled.

On January 2, 1868, H.M.S. *Octavia* arrived off Zula carrying Sir Robert Napier and his staff. Once ashore he immediately conducted a thorough inspection of the work in hand, and was soon telegraphing the Secretary of State for India requesting the provision of (among other items) 15,000 pairs of woollen socks and 15,000 blankets (which he predicted would be vital in the cooler regions of the Abyssinian highlands), 500,000 lb. of biscuit, 100,000 lb. of salt meat and 30,000 gallons of rum.

Three weeks of hectic administrative preparations ensued. On account of an outbreak of disease among the horses, the Commander-in-Chief soon moved most of the cavalry to new camps near Kumayli, where water had been discovered, and ordered a more rapid transfer of men and stores to the foot of the mountains.

By mid-January Napier had worked out a comprehensive plan. Obviously the sooner the main body set out for Magdala the better. The coastal plains were disease-ridden, and it was absolutely essential that the whole expedition should be completed before the onset of the heavy summer rains. Furthermore, a report dated December 18 had arrived from the interior revealing that the Emperor Theodore was already slowly wending his way with some 8,000 warriors, six large guns and 14 wagons of munitions to Magdala, laboriously making a road for his artillery. If it were at all possible, Napier would prefer to reach Magdala before Theodore and rescue the prisoners before meeting the Emperor's main army.

Nevertheless, Napier was by now completely convinced that no "rapid dash" of the sort so dear to the armchair

strategists of Whitehall was possible. In the first place, the attitudes of the princes through whose provinces Napier would have to pass on his southward journey were still unclear: they could prove ferocious foes on their own account. Even if the various tribes remained friendly, the sheer ruggedness of the Abyssinian tableland would greatly hinder the advance of his guns and supply convoys. Inevitably the convoys would be very large – for the advanced brigade was reporting that scant supplies would be forthcoming from the countryside: a little meat, barley, fodder and firewood – at a price – but never enough to support the whole striking force. Since it was the height of the dry season, water would be critically scarce for much of the journey and would have to be carried with them.

The trickiest difficulty was Theodore himself. He would not tamely submit without a struggle, and Napier had to devise means of sure success in any engagement against hardy mountaineers fighting deep in their own country. All the guns would have to be taken to Magdala no matter what natural obstacles lay in their path. The Commander-in-Chief's plan was to march a column of 5,000 combat troops to Magdala, taking with them everything they might require, by the most direct available route. This spearhead (later named the 1st Division, commanded by Sir Charles Staveley) would travel southward through Senafé and Adigrat to Antalo, the halfway point where another forward base would have to be established, then on to Lake Ashangi and thence to the River Bashillo and Magdala itself. The remainder of the troops (the 2nd Division) were to be employed in detachments to safeguard the ever-lengthening lines of communication.

On January 29 the Commander-in-Chief decided that the time had come for the main movement to commence. That same day the long red, green and khaki-clad columns, with their seven-mile "tail" of mule-trains, gun-teams, elephants and servants, began to snake their slow way over the coastal plain and up the steep and uneven paths through mountainous defiles towards the Abyssinian plateau.

At the beginning of February, Napier

Prince Kassai, a bitter enemy of Theodore, allowed the British army to cross his domains and sold it supplies of grain.

and the advance brigade were at their first base, Adigrat. Here a fortnight's lull ensued. Although the cooler, healthier atmosphere of the high ground was a welcome relief from the steamy heat of the coastal plain – and the men were glad of their groundsheets and blankets at night – the going was proving so bad for the supply convoys that a period had to be set aside to let them catch up. Clearly the campaign was going to be even more prolonged and tiring than predicted.

Already the government in London was becoming alarmed at the mounting expense of the expedition and the Duke of Cambridge was writing pressingly about "flying columns" as a quick way to "finish the business."

"It is so simple for people at home to say 'Why don't you advance?'" wrote Lieutenant William Scott, one of Napier's aides-de-camp, "while here we are . . . barely able to do more than keep ourselves in food." The railway, which had been intended to carry the bulk of the supplies across the coastal plain from Zula to Kumayli, was making disappointing progress. Even by February 19 it had advanced only halfway to the foot of the mountains. From the start, the builders were beset with harassing difficulties. Most of these were directly due to the Bombay authorities, "five different descriptions of rail having been provided for the work on four different principles of fixing." Several of the engines and much of the rolling-stock proved defective. The blazing sun and the meagre water ration of one and a half gallons per man made it impossible to expect more than six and a half hours of labour a day from the native gangers. In the end, the Engineers completed some 14 miles of 5 ft. 6 in. track, and between March and June the railway carried 13,000 tons of stores and 24,000 troops; but that was less than expected.

The advance brigade reached Antalo – 200 miles from the coast – on February 14, and four days later the main body set out from Adigrat to join them. The going proved worse than ever, and it was extremely difficult for the transport division to bring up the 170 mule-loads a day needed to keep the force supplied from camps farther back along the trail. Napier had to order a large reduction in the amount of personal equipment being carried. Before leaving Zula, Headquarters had restricted each officer to one servant and a single baggage-mule, while three officers or 12 N.C.O.s and men were expected to share a single bell-tent. Many had evaded this instruction. So, from February 20, all officers were restricted to 75 lb. of kit and every other rank to 25 lb. Practically all the native servants were sent back to Zula. A month later, near Lake Ashangi, even direr reductions were enforced. From then on, 12 officers or 20 other ranks were expected to share a single tent, all private baggage was discarded and all but the Indian mule-drivers were sent to the rear. Eventually even the coveted daily rum issue had to be suspended.

Nevertheless, the health, morale and discipline of the British and the Indian units remained satisfactory for the greater part of the long march. There are no recorded instances of soldiers marauding –there wasn't very much to loot – and, in the carefully measured words of Captain Hozier, the official historian, "no swarthy damsel was subjected to any rude gallantry on the part of the redcoats." As for the officers, they somehow found time and

energy to visit Coptic churches to stare at ancient manuscripts, and many enjoyed shooting wildlife when opportunity offered. It was indulgence in this gentlemanly pastime that caused the expedition's first European fatality, when a Colonel Dunn of the 33rd had the misfortune to shoot himself.

The hybrid collection of muleteers, however, argued, grumbled and fought among themselves, losing no opportunity to loot the stores with which they were entrusted. Worst of all, they neglected their mules, and it was not until some sharp disciplinary examples had been made, and the worst of the riff-raff had been replaced, that matters improved significantly in this section.

Each day brought its own crop of difficulties. Reveille was sounded half an hour before dawn, and the next night's camp was rarely reached before dusk, but it was exceptional for a day's march to cover more than ten miles. The route of the expedition led over mountain chains and down into deep chasms worn in past ages by fierce torrents, which were now often little more than trickles of water. The rough trails blazed by the advance guard and the pioneers often proved extremely perilous. The elephants baulked at loose scree, the mules tended to become sick at high altitudes, guns and carriages had to be lowered down precipitous slopes by ropes. Supplies dwindled. Sometimes a few bushels of grain were purchased from local chieftains – who pushed up their prices to the maximum – but usually there was little to be found.

Late in February there came something of a breakthrough: a rendezvous was arranged on the banks of the River Diab with Prince Kassai of Tigré, who controlled the first 150 miles of country. The Prince appeared with an imposing escort of 4,000 warriors – the first native soldiery the expedition had yet encountered – and the British troops were favourably impressed with their fierce bearing and reasonably modern firearms. For two days discussions about friendly co-operation and free passage went on, with associated feastings. Napier spared no pains to impress his visitor. The guns fired, cavalry wheeled, infantry manœuvred; gifts were exchanged and toasts drunk; even a group photograph was taken. When the two leaders parted

Major-General Sir Charles Staveley, a Crimean War veteran and an old and trusted friend of Napier, was appointed second in command of the Abyssinian expedition.

on the 27th, Prince Kassai had promised Napier every possible assistance.

Napier reached Antalo on March 2, and another ten-day pause ensued while the Commander-in-Chief once again reduced the bulk of the force's baggage, waited for his hospitals to be brought up and reorganized the expedition into its two final divisions. The 1st, commanded by Staveley, became the striking force, comprising some 5,000 men divided into two brigades and an advance guard, and all the guns. The 2nd was made up of the Antalo, Adigrat and Senafé garrisons, the Zula command and all the other communications detachments.

The columns of the strike force set out from Antalo at daily intervals, the first starting off on March 12. Eight days later Lake Ashangi was reached – and further drastic reductions in the "tail" announced: ambulance allocations were reduced to three *doolies* (a form of mule-borne litter) for every 100 men, and rations were also slightly cut to enable each brigade to carry 15 days' supplies.

No attempt was made to drive a wagon-trail beyond Lake Ashangi; only men, mules and horses were to proceed, and elephants carrying the heavy Armstrong guns in dismantled sections on their backs. Magdala now lay about 100 miles ahead. Despite all this, Theodore won the race to Magdala. He even managed to manhandle his pride and joy, a huge 70-ton mortar named "Theodorus" in his honour, into position near the fortress.

The time for the long-postponed "dash" had clearly come – but the going proved more difficult than ever and the continuous strain of long marches and short water rations had taken their toll on the troops. Some were openly recalcitrant. Men of the 33rd swore at their officers, some even "falling out from the baggage guard, throwing themselves down and refusing to move," calling out for water. Napier immediately dealt with this indiscipline by ordering the King's Own to take over the head of the column, relegating the recalcitrant 33rd to the rearguard. This lesson had the desired effect, and the march went on.

The tension was now mounting. News filtered through from Magdala describing Theodore's preparations to meet the invasion, and at the end of the first week of April Napier sent a formal demand for surrender to the Emperor. There was no reply, but Napier was somewhat reassured to learn that the Muslim Gallas tribes, from whom Theodore had originally captured Magdala, had sealed off the fortress from the south. After crossing the River Jidda, the 1st Division converged on the River Bashillo, the last obstacle between Napier and his quarry. The leading brigade reached the watercourse on the 8th and the expedition again halted to complete its final arrangements. Magdala now lay only 12 miles ahead.

Meer Akbir Ali, an Indian attached to the army's intelligence unit, persuaded the Gallas tribes to join forces with the British.

Despite their spears, studded shields and old-fashioned rifles, the Abyssinian warriors faced the heavily armed British with tenacious courage.

Theodore, meanwhile, was busy whipping up confidence and enthusiasm among his 10,000 warriors. He promised rich booty for one and all if they performed well, and threatened dire retribution on any waverers. No potential waverers doubted his word, for, after watching the approach of the distant columns from the flat-topped summit of nearby Mount Fahla throughout the 9th, Theodore returned to Magdala and spent the night butchering several hundred of his hapless Abyssinian prisoners, hurling many chained in pairs down a precipice. When his rage subsided, the demented Emperor prayed for forgiveness, and interviewed a not unnaturally apprehensive Rassam about what the future might hold. The night passed without further incident, however, and early on the 10th the warrior-monarch left Magdala, and marched out to occupy the height of Fahla where seven cannon, including Theodorus, had already been sited. The climax of the campaign was near.

The fortress of Magdala itself forms part of an inaccessible mountain range that describes a half-circle from west to east, about five miles in diameter. Three heights dominate the range. Closest to the British position towered the Mountain of Fahla, overlooking both the Arogi Plain and the sole practicable approach to Magdala, the King's Road. This road clung to the northern slopes of Fahla before passing over a saddle on to the equally precipitous southern slopes of neighbouring Mount Selasse, the centre of the range. This mountain rises 9,100 feet above sea-level. Beyond Selasse lies the Plateau of Islamgee, and at the eastern end of the range stands Magdala, looming some 300 feet above Islamgee like an eagle's eyrie.

Despite the presence of the friendly Gallas tribes hemming in Magdala from the east and south, Napier could not escape the fact that Fahla and Selasse were the keys to Magdala. He would have to attack from the west, tackling each obstacle in turn. The precipices, ravines and rocky slopes of the surrounding terrain ruled out any other course. It was not an alluring prospect. In addition, between the River Bashillo and Magdala there was no water, and every drop would have to be carried forward from the river. Any hold-up in the supply of this vital commodity might well have a serious effect on the fighting.

On April 9 the order was given to advance, and shortly before dawn the following morning, Good Friday, a reconnaissance team set off towards the head of the pass on to the Arogi Plateau. With them was an escort of sappers to build a rough road. The 1st Brigade of the 1st Division followed behind. The going proved exceptionally difficult, even for Abyssinia, and within a few hours several infantrymen had collapsed from heat-stroke. The brigade was soon left far behind, and even the Engineers became dubious about their road-building task. But then news from the reconnaissance team that the head of the pass had been found undefended and was now secure caused everyone to redouble their efforts. Napier accepted a suggestion that he might now send forward the baggage and guns and very soon the mule-trains were moving up the King's Road.

Napier and his staff set spurs to their horses and rode off ahead of the infantry to high ground that overlooked the point where the King's Road breasted the slope and entered the Arogi Plateau. An

unpleasant surprise awaited them. Despite the reconnaissance team's earlier assurances, they saw no sign of troops holding the vulnerable defile. "When I came up and found my order about the road not executed," wrote Napier to his wife, "I got very uneasy, and pushed on just in time to see the mountain guns and rockets emerge from the pass close under the enemy's position [Fahla]." The baggage of the army, and, even more important, its precious guns, were now exposed to enemy attack.

Fortunately, Sir Robert Napier was a man of instant decision. He ordered the 23rd Punjab Pioneers (leading the 1st Brigade) to move left to secure the head of the pass and join the mountain guns. It was not a minute too soon, for as the leading mules of the gun-batteries emerged from the pass a salvo thundered out from Theodore's seven cannon on the summit of Fahla. At the same instant a mass of native warriors swarmed down its slopes. The time was four o'clock in the afternoon; the Battle of Arogi had begun.

Watching from the crest of Fahla, the Emperor Theodore had noted the mule-trains approaching up the King's Road, but had failed to spot the position of Napier's infantry column (the 23rd Punjab Pioneers). In the firm belief that the British General had committed a blunder, Theodore immediately ordered his favourite chieftain, Fitaurari Gabi, to take 500 chiefs and 6,000 men and swoop down to loot the apparently unprotected convoy. Such an easy success, he hoped, would serve to put a fine edge on his men's mettle.

The Emperor himself remained on Fahla to direct the covering fire. Theodore's very first salvo fell uncomfortably close to Napier's staff and the deploying Punjabis. The accuracy of the enemy's fire at the extreme range of 3,000 yards came as something of a shock. But little damage was done, and subsequent salvoes fell wide: evidently the technical problems of firing plunging shot on to the British troops at extreme range proved too much for the Abyssinian master-gunners. Moreover, the Emperor's vaunted secret weapon, the 70-ton mortar, Theodorus, disconcertingly and noisily burst its barrel the very first time it was discharged.

Meanwhile, under the cover of this fire, the whooping hordes of Abyssinian warriors, led by scarlet-clad chiefs on horseback, were covering the one and three-quarter miles to the British position. While the Naval Brigade set up their rocket-tubes, and caused some havoc among the approaching human tide with their hissing and bounding rockets, the troops deployed into two lines to await the onset of the enemy. In the excitement of the moment the men quite forgot their parched throats and swept forward with a rousing – if hoarse – cheer.

The King's Own fanned out into skirmishing order, and opened fire on Theodore's warriors at a range of 150 yards with telling effect. "How they just about did catch it!" enthused one of the officers, Lieutenant Scott. "You never saw such a sight!" Faced by the sustained fire of breech-loading rifles, the Abyssinians started to falter and soon they began to fall back towards Fahla, opening a sniping fire from the bushes and boulders on the lower slopes. They hit several British, but killed no one.

Within half an hour the Naval Brigade were able to direct their rocket-fire against Theodore's guns on the summit of Fahla. In spite of the range, the sailors made good practice. One hissing rocket narrowly missed the Emperor, who exclaimed: "What a terrible weapon! Who can fight against it?" and covered himself with his studded shield in alarm.

After a couple of other actions, in which the 23rd Punjabi Pioneers put a sizable part of the Abyssinian horde to flight with their bayonets and the baggage guard poured several withering volleys into another detachment of the enemy, the tide of the battle swung decisively in the British favour.

The Abyssinians suffered heavy casualties from bullet, shell and bayonet. By seven in the evening, with everyone soaked to the skin from torrential rain that fell during the fighting, the action of Arogi was practically over. After the last shot of the day had been fired, no less than 700 Abyssinians lay dead in the field – including Fitaurari Gabi – while 1,200 more lay wounded. The British had 20 wounded (of whom two subsequently died). The superiority of well-trained and well-armed troops over less sophisticated masses had been amply demonstrated. Theodore's gamble had not come off.

As dusk descended, Sir Robert Napier ordered his jubilant troops to halt. The men built their bivouacs near the baggage-trains, but as the tents and supplies had not come up from the camp at the River Bashillo, most of them spent a cold and hungry night. Early on the morning of the 11th, however, the supply convoys reached the encampment, closely followed by the 2nd Brigade which took over the forward positions. Meanwhile, the doctors and orderlies were doing their best for the wounded of both sides, and parties were detailed to bury as many of the slain as possible.

Theodore spent the night with his shaken army on the inhospitable slopes of Mount Selasse. He sorely felt the loss of his favourite chieftain, and accordingly, shortly after midnight, decided to negotiate. A message was sent to Rassam in Magdala, imploring his aid. As a result of lengthy consultations, a delegation including two of the prisoners – Mr. Flad, the missionary, and a Lieutenant Prideaux – was sent down to the expedition's camp early on the 11th to sound out Sir Robert's intentions. The Commander-in-Chief refused even to hint at a reconciliation, but told the envoys that the prisoners must be handed over with no further delay, and that Theodore should immediately surrender himself unconditionally into Queen Victoria's hands in return for a guarantee of fair treatment. To enable Theodore to make up his mind, Sir Robert announced his willingness to observe a 24-hour armistice – and backed his suggestions with a demonstration shoot by the Armstrong guns. The envoys were suitably impressed.

Meanwhile, Theodore's attitude had hardened. Daylight had revealed that his losses were not all that serious, and his warriors' morale seemed better than expected. Consequently he received Napier's message with scorn, and even returned his letter unopened.

This insulting rebuff left Sir Robert in a quandary. If he were to order a new attack, what would prevent Theodore from murdering his hostages without further ado? To gain a little time, the General ordered the delegation to return again to Theodore with a stern uncompromising message, insisting that the rejected letter contained Napier's final offer to the recalcitrant Emperor.

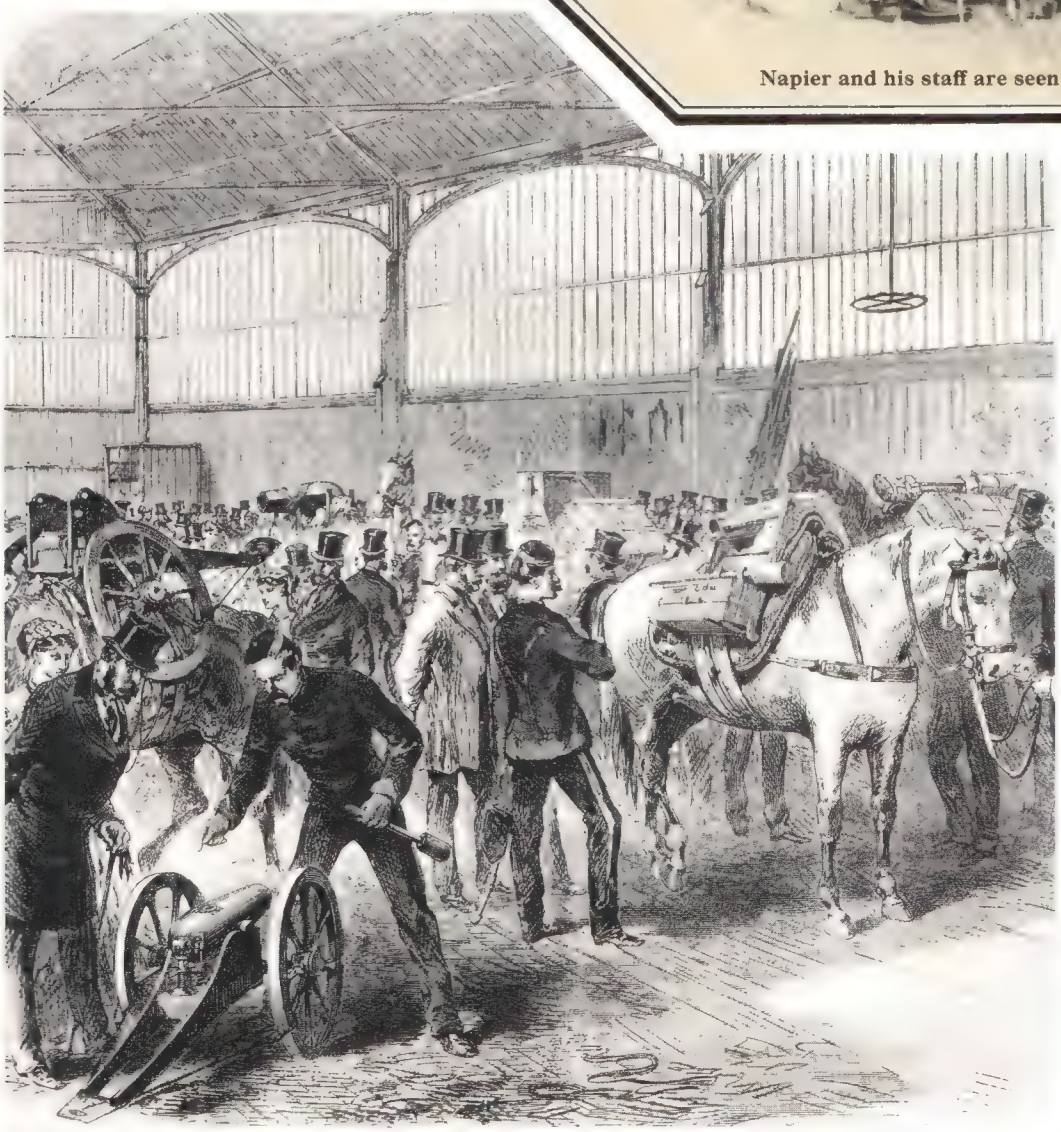
THE ROAD TO MAGDALA

Napier's march to corner the Abyssinian Emperor in his rocky eyrie at Magdala (above) was a classic of imperial campaigning. He faced a host of problems that other generals had met elsewhere – harsh, little-known terrain, disease, extended supply lines – but by a masterpiece of planning he overcame them to perfection. Building a railway to carry supplies over the shimmering coastal desert area, he marched 13,000 troops 400 miles through trackless mountain wastes and routed the foe with the loss of not a single man in action and only 35 through disease.

Elaborate Preparation

The task of punishing the tyrannical Emperor fell to Sir Robert Napier, a distinguished Indian Army officer who blended bravery, amply demonstrated in the Indian Mutiny of 1857, with administrative flair. The success of the campaign, as Napier emphasized to the government, depended on a large-scale expedition provided with an efficient transport system. He selected some 13,000 British and Indian troops and gathered an impressive array of artillery, while the Foreign Office sent out agents to scour Spain, India and the Middle East for 3,000 horses, 16,000 mules and ponies, 5,000 bullocks, 8,000 camels and 44 elephants. Troops, guns, stores and animals were then packed into a vast fleet of steamers and sailing vessels and landed at the little Red Sea village of Zula, which lay in an Egyptian enclave on the coast of Abyssinia.

Napier and his staff are seen planning the campaign in one of the first pictures



Mountain artillery earmarked for Abyssinia is examined by members of the public during an open day at Woolwich Arsenal.

Muleteers in Cairo demonstrate their beasts to British officials buying baggage animals for the forthcoming Abyssinian expedition.

taken by official army photographers.

Mahouts line up their elephants ready to be hoisted unceremoniously aboard a sailing-ship about to leave Bombay.

A Bustling Beach-Head

The first troops to arrive at Zula were Indian sappers who set about transforming the village into a giant base camp. Their first task was to build a pair of jetties where ships could unload. Soon rolling-stock, engines, lines and sleepers began arriving from Bombay and within a few weeks a railway was snaking away to Kumayli, where the mountains began.

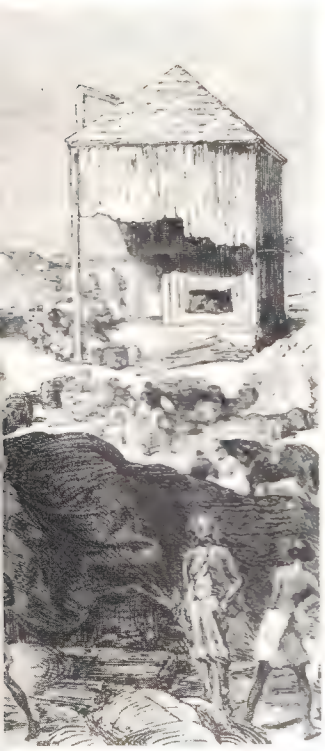
Britain provided Napier with impressive scientific equipment: searchlights, well-boring machinery, telegraphic equipment and water-condensers. The sprawling base throbbed with activity day and night. While steamers were disgorging tons of ammunition, food and forage, horse transports disembarked vast herds of apprehensive baggage-animals. Troopships followed crammed with perspiring cargoes of soldiers. Transports brought an army of labourers, farriers, grooms, muleteers and camel-drivers.

By 1868, this mass of men and animals had been organized into an army, and Napier gave the signal to advance. After crossing 13 miles of burning salt desert to Kumayli, the expedition climbed ponderously into the mountains on the first stage of the 400-mile march toward Theodore's fortress at Magdala.

A train, carrying troops and stores, steams over one of the bridges built by the Royal Engineers on the line from Zula to Kumayl

At the busy new port of Zula, mules and elephants are unloaded on the quayside and a train on the jetty (background) collects provisions from the waiting transports.

A mortar is loaded on to an elephant. Abyssinians, who thought elephants untameable, were amazed at their submission.



Draught-bullocks slake a thirst at Kumayli's wells. The water was pumped to the surface through metal tubes sunk deep in the earth.

First Blood at Arogi

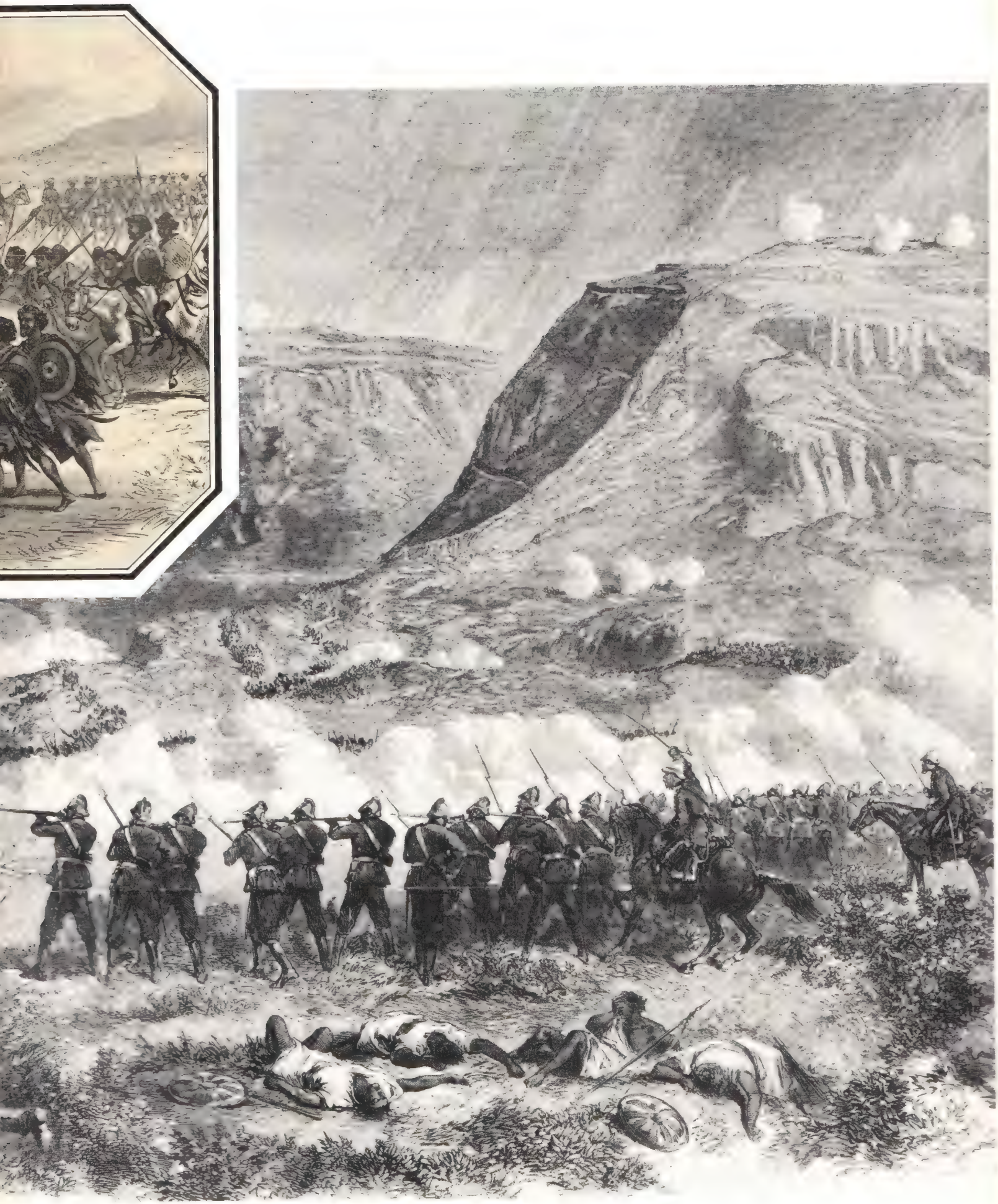
The road to Magdala passed over sheer slopes and yawning chasms. Nevertheless, Napier maintained a steady ten miles a day advance in the mountains. After enlisting the support of an Abyssinian Prince named Kassai at a meeting on February 25, Napier led the column into Antalo, halfway to Magdala. The army set off again ten days later.

As it spilled on to the Arogi Plain before Magdala on Good Friday, 1868, with its baggage-mules in the lead, Theodore attacked. Guns boomed from the mountain-sides and a wave of warriors swept towards the animals. But Napier was ready for the onslaught and a hail of fire from breech-loading rifles tore into the advancing mass. Theodore's hordes wavered, halted and then fled. The British killed 700 Abyssinians and wounded 1,200 more, at negligible cost to themselves. The road to Magdala was open.

Prince Kassai's retinue of warriors and musicians marches past a British guard of honour during the ceremonies Napier ordered to help secure the Prince's help against Theodore.

The elephant column carrying dismantled artillery wound its way placidly through the mountains as the battle raged ahead of it.

British troops hold off Theodore's yelling legions at the Battle of Arogi. Indian troops (left) move forward into position.

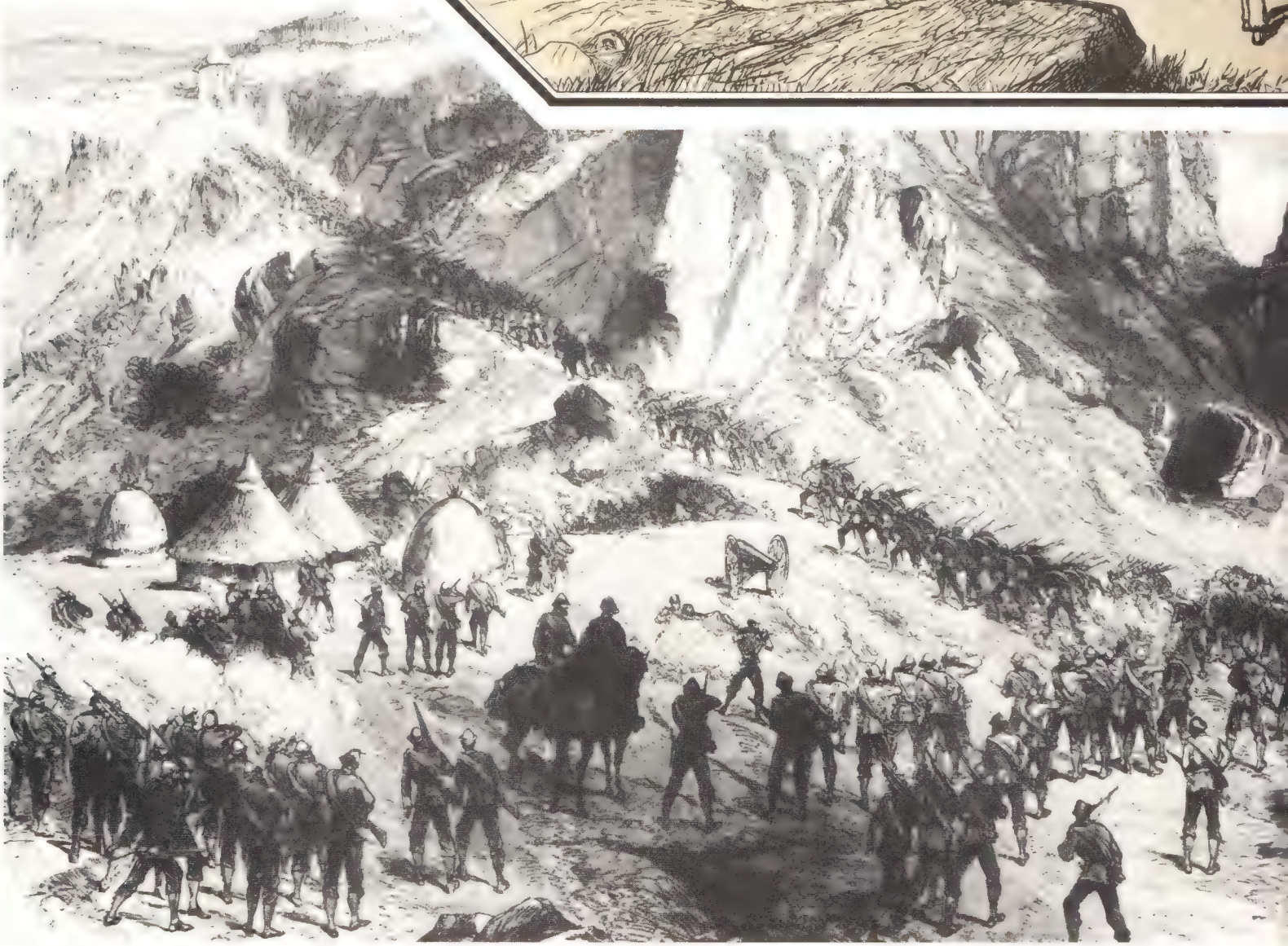


The Fall of Magdala

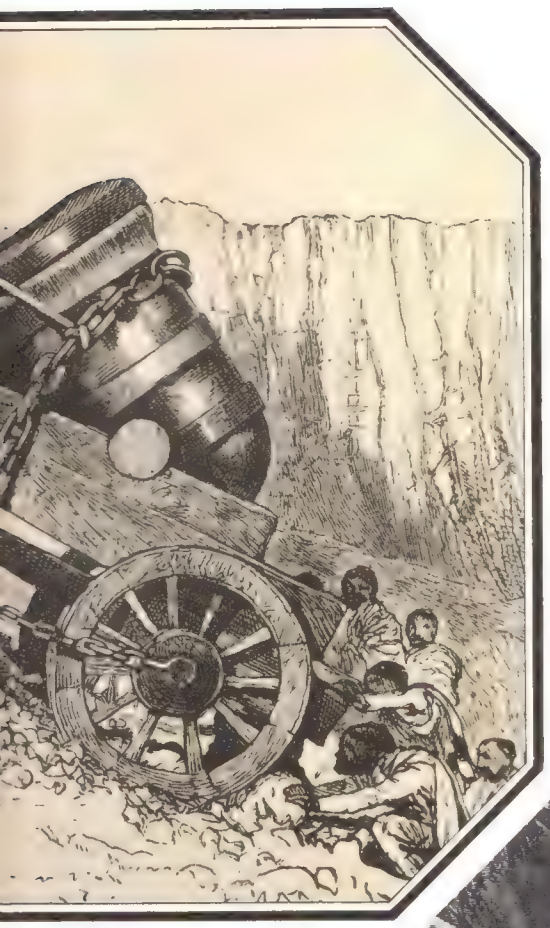
After his crushing defeat at Arogi, Theodore released the British consul and the European hostages whom Napier had come to rescue. The freed captives were greeted at the British camp with cheers from the troops. Napier had achieved his first objective. But if Theodore thought he could avert the day of reckoning with a conciliatory gesture he was sadly mistaken, for Napier was determined to sweep the Emperor from his natural rock fortress of Magdala.

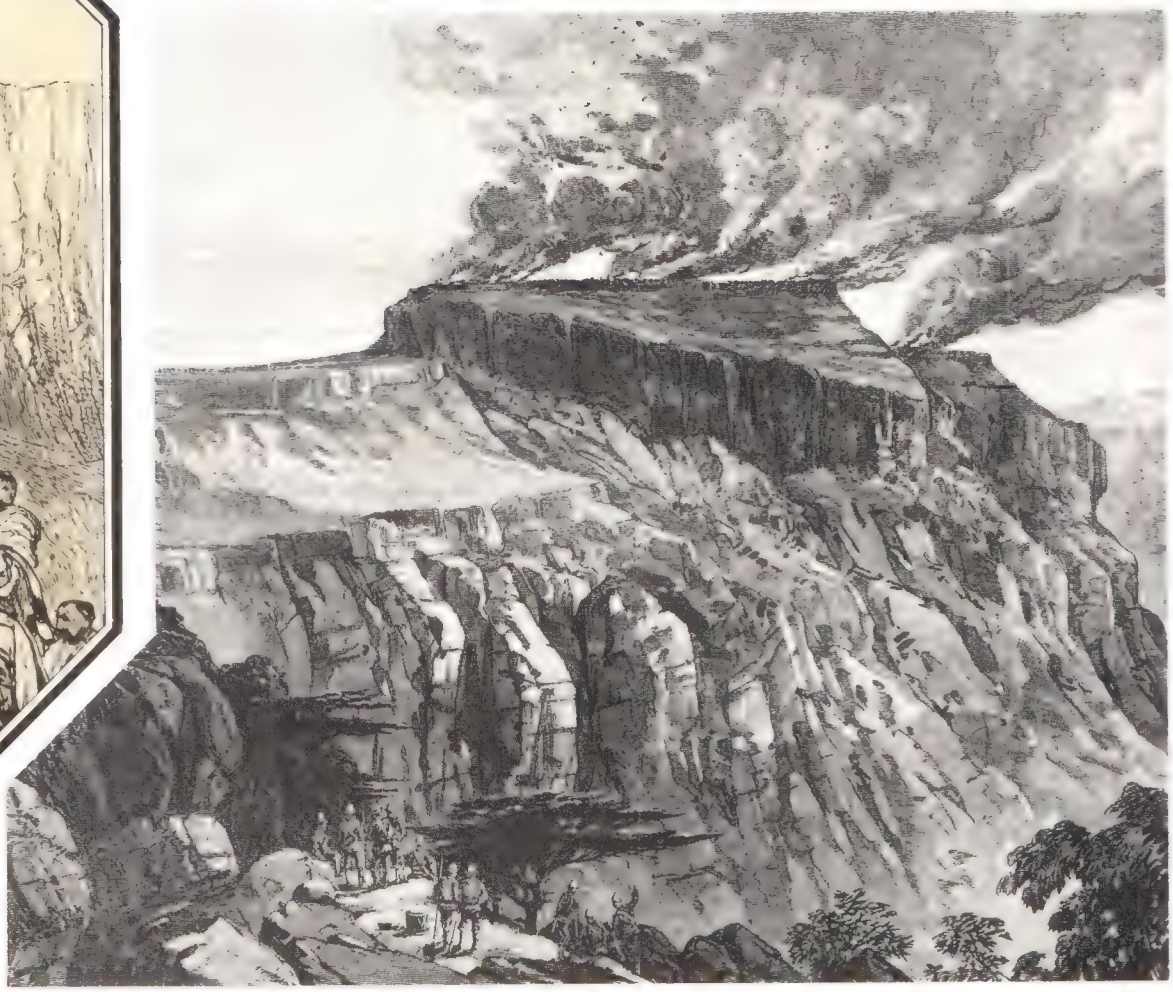
The British attack was preceded by a furious artillery bombardment. Then assault troops marched up a narrow path and burst in. After Magdala fell, troops searched for the Emperor but found him dead; he had shot himself through the head, with a pistol Queen Victoria had given him. Napier set fire to the Emperor's bastion, blew up most of the captured guns and marched for the coast.

Theodore's troops drag a giant mortar, known a "Theodorus," after the Emperor, up to Magdala.



While a detachment of British troops keep up a steady covering fire from the foot of Magdala's cliffs, others march up to storm it.





Plumes of smoke and vast explosions issue from Magdala after British troops set fire to its buildings and ammunition-dumps.

Soldiers peer curiously at the dead Theodore. Souvenir-hunters almost stripped the corpse of its robes before it was hurriedly buried.

Laurels for the Victor

The troops trudged back towards Zula, their spirits raised for a time by generous issues of new boots, chocolate, rum and beer. Even the aloof Europeans they had rescued began to unbend. By June 2 all the troops had reached Zula and a week later they were sailing for home. When they arrived, they were greeted by ecstatic crowds and bands playing "See the Conquering Hero Come." For, to the ordinary public, these were the men who had vindicated Britain's honour. Napier, fêted everywhere he went, was raised to the peerage. Two years later he was appointed Commander-in-Chief in India. He died at home 20 years later, a venerable Field-Marshal.

The cost of rescuing Consul Cameron, who died worn out by his ill-treatment in 1870, had been a staggering £8,600,000. But after an initial furore, Parliament and country were consoled by the fact that Napier had gambled on performing a near-impossible task and won. No one was going to quibble over the stakes.

European missionaries freed from Magdala jails by Napier's success display the shackle that once held them.

Theodore's broken army with its wives, families, animals and possessions streams away from Magdala to disperse among the mountains.

Theodore's European prisoners, with their Abyssinian servants, ride silently away from Magdala, their long incarceration over.

Napier, standing next to the bearded Mayor of Dover, greets a cheering crowd at the railway station on his return from Abyssinia.

II. The Conquering Hero

Dramatic events had been taking place in Theodore's camp after Napier's demand for unconditional surrender. Once his rage had calmed down, the Emperor summoned a full council of chiefs, and debated his future moves. Some spoke of killing the prisoners forthwith, but the majority favoured their release – and to everybody's surprise the paradoxical Theodore tamely consented. Then, suddenly in a new spasm of maniacal fury that must have cause his followers to doubt his sanity, he seized a pistol and attempted to shoot himself through the mouth. The weapon failed to fire. This Theodore chose to represent as a revelation that God was on his side but, again paradoxically, he confirmed his intention of releasing the Europeans.

Soon a jubilant Rassam was leading Consul Cameron and several more members of the European party down the hillside. Meeting the delegation bringing Napier's second message to Theodore, they went down together. The troops cheered as the party reached the lines.

Several European families still remained in Magdala through illness or other circumstances, but by April 12 the last of them were safe, thanks to Napier's cool-headed diplomacy. A wave of relief swept through the expeditionary force. "I send the prisoners to the rear tomorrow," wrote Napier to his wife. "It is not easy to express my gratitude to God for the complete success as regards the prisoners." One object of the campaign had been safely accomplished. It only remained to punish Theodore.

After releasing the hostages, Theodore persuaded himself that his pacific gestures, including a present of 1,000 cattle and 500 sheep for the Commander-in-Chief, would induce Napier to relent. As a further conciliatory move, the Emperor ordered the evacuation of his guns from Fahla. "Surely it is peace, now that they have taken my power from me – surely it is peace!" he exclaimed to his entourage. But when the British turned back his herds, he saw he was wrong. In great despondency, Theodore returned into his fortress. Early on the 13th, he made a bid to escape with 2,000 men from the northern side of Magdala but changed his mind when he realized that all effective exits were blocked by bloodthirsty Gallas tribesmen who had been persuaded to co-operate with the British. Back in the town, Theodore gave formal permission for any of his followers to desert and surrender, and soon a multitude of warriors, with their families, cattle and possessions, were swarming out of Magdala. Several hundred, however, freely chose to remain with him to the end. Their master determined to sell his life dearly, and made plans for a last stand within his natural redoubt.

By the early hours of the 13th, Napier had decided that Magdala would have to be stormed without further delay. The original 24-hour armistice had already lasted more than two days. Theodore had refused to surrender. The longer the attack was postponed the greater the danger that Theodore might find some means of slipping away and escaping.

About 9 a.m. on Easter Monday the advance began. Three companies were detailed to occupy Fahla and two more scaled Selasse. Three mountain guns were somehow manhandled on to the summit of Selasse, the rest of the artillery continuing up the road below.

So far everything was going remark-

ably well. By midday a new flood of disarmed Abyssinian warriors and their families was streaming down from both peaks – some eyewitnesses placed their number as high as 25,000. With both mountains secured soon after, Napier called up the Armstrong guns on elephant-back to site them on the saddle, and soon the 12-pounders were in action, firing across the inner side of the concave range of mountains into Magdala at a range of 2,700 yards. In the meantime, a squadron of Indian cavalry, headed by Captain Speedy, pressed forward on to Islamgee where they interrupted Theodore and a band of his warriors attempting to manhandle their guns into Magdala from the park near the native market.

Gradually the Plateau of Islamgee filled with British and Indian troops as the brigades and guns arrived. At the foot of a precipice, they soon discovered the putrefying bodies of the captives hurled down from Magdala on Theodore's night of fury. "The sight of wholesale slaughter caused a deep feeling of hatred to Theodore among the British soldiery," noted Captain Hozier.

Sir Robert Napier had now completed his reconnaissance of the natural and man-made defences guarding the northern approaches to Theodore's lair. Beyond a sharp dip at the southern end of Islamgee towered a steep cliff-face 300 feet high, scaled only by a single, narrow, twisting path. Two fortified gates four feet wide guarded this slender avenue of approach. Theodore had strengthened the defences by piling blocks of stone against the inside of the closed lower gates, making them virtually impenetrable.

Only a frontal attack up the path and through the gates was practicable. Shortly after 1 p.m. Napier began an artillery bombardment, but it did little damage. Meanwhile the assaulting column formed up on the Plateau of Islamgee. It consisted mainly of companies of the 33rd Foot, but there were also a company of Royal Engineers and another of Indian sappers and miners equipped with scaling-ladders, charges of powder for blowing the gates and picks and crowbars.

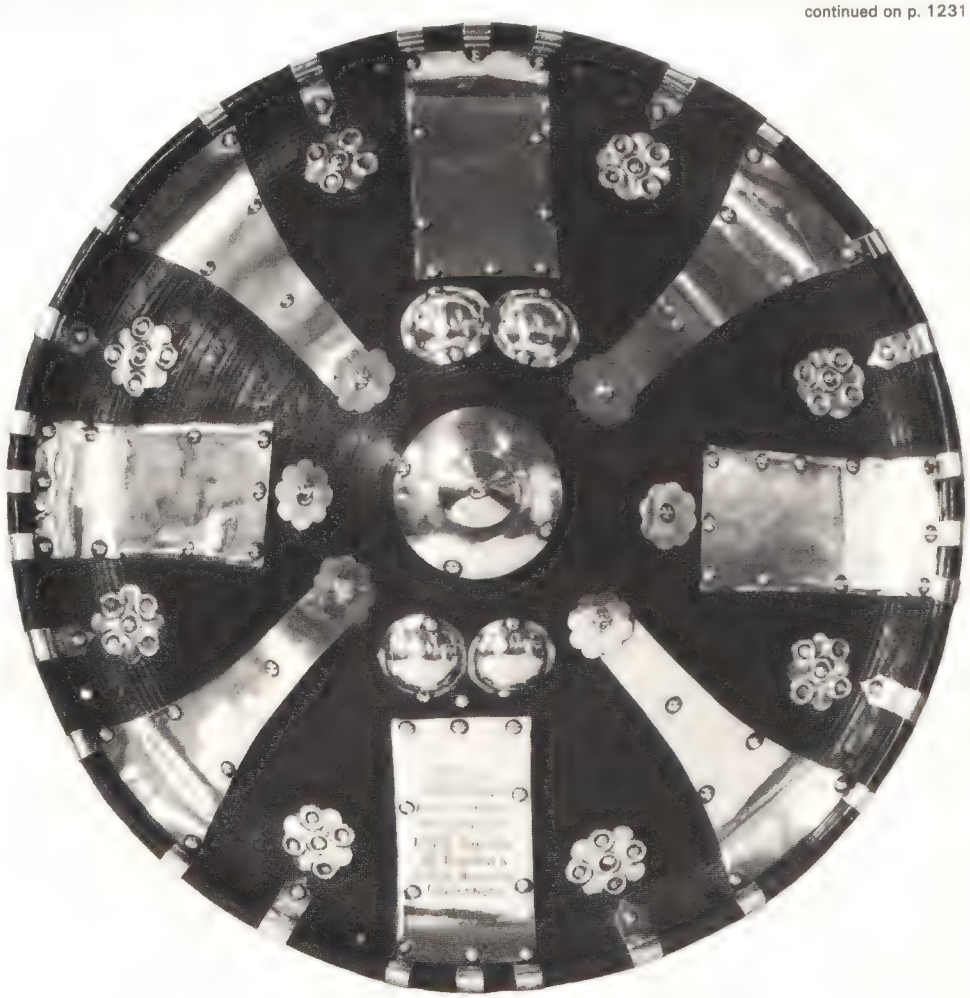
Shortly after 3 p.m. the expedition's guns thundered out in a renewed and sustained bombardment, but elicited no reply from the silent ramparts of Magdala, where the defenders were lying low. An hour later Sir Robert Napier ordered the storming column to advance to the assault. The troops marched off, and soon the leading units had reached the foot of the cliff-path. They at once began to climb, covered the while by the fire of two companies of the 33rd deployed on either side of the line of advance. The defenders replied with musketry, but caused surprisingly few casualties.

The lower gate was reached – but then a disconcerting pause ensued. The sappers had forgotten to bring their powder-charges and scaling-ladders, or else dropped them on the way up. They set to work on the gates with their crowbars, but made little impression. Next, rather than allow the entire impetus of the assault to die away, three companies of the 33rd turned off the track to the right and began to seek a way round.

Now took place a celebrated incident that earned the 33rd Foot its first two Victoria Crosses. A tall private soldier named J. Bergin managed to hack away with his bayonet some of the protruding thorn-bushes from a section of the 12-foot-high palisade along the lower defences and then asked a neighbouring drummer, Magner, to give him a leg up. It proved easier, however, for Bergin to heave the drummer towards the top of the wall until his fingers could just hook over the edge. A stalwart shove from the butt of Bergin's rifle quickly deposited the drummer fair and square on top of the wall. Ignoring heavy enemy fire, Magner was just able to lean over and haul his companion up beside him, whereafter he continued to assist more comrades up in the same way while Bergin fired away single-handed at every Abyssinian he could see, killing several. A way was thus opened through Magdala's lower defences.

As more and more men appeared over

continued on p. 1231



This Abyssinian hide shield with its silver mountings was, as its plaque proclaims, one of Napier's trophies.

British soldiers mount a leisurely guard on the crude church at Magdala where Theodore was buried. With characteristic irreverence, they have draped their washing on its walls.

Charles Speedy, Warrior Extraordinary

Captain Charles Speedy was a prototype Victorian eccentric. Linguist, diplomat, farmer and freelance soldier, he went his own way ignoring the norms of British society. He would have been invaluable in any one of the colonial wars Britain waged in the 19th Century. In Abyssinia he was quite simply the most important – and certainly the most imposing – member of Napier's entire army on the march to Magdala.

A giant of 6 feet 5 inches with a massive beard, Speedy was no stranger to the Emperor Theodore's land. After a spell in the British and Indian armies, Speedy visited Abyssinia in 1860 en route to New Zealand where he planned to settle. When he had explored Abyssinia and bagged a few of its elephants, he joined the Emperor's forces in one of the bloody civil wars that periodically wracked the country. Theodore grew fond of the powerful, rawboned Englishman – who could prove his strength by splitting a sheep's carcass from end to end with a single sabre blow – and gave him command in his army. But Speedy was restless, and in 1864 he headed for Massawa where he acted briefly as British vice-consul before resuming his journey to New Zealand. When he arrived in Auckland he found the Maori Wars raging. He abandoned his plans to farm, took over a company of the town's militia and plunged into the thick of the fighting. But New Zealand was not, apparently, the promised land. When a telegram arrived from Napier offering Speedy the post of chief intelligence officer with the army that was to invade Abyssinia, he leaped at the chance to return. Barely a month later he stepped ashore at Zula, borrowed a horse and with no baggage save the clothes he wore, rode south to meet Napier.

Speedy's first assignment was to resolve a communications crisis. Work on the vital telegraphic link from the coast to Antalo had come to a standstill through lack of telegraph-poles. Speedy ransacked army funds and offered fistfuls of Maria Theresa thalers for poles. The effect was almost magical. Natives poured in carrying timber. Many were so anxious to get their share of the silver that they tore down the roofs of their houses and rushed in to exchange poles for the coveted coins.

Speedy was very much in his element in the mountains. Proud of his toughness, he scorned a tent and slept in a *dooli*, an enclosed Indian stretcher usually used for the wounded. He ate frugally and worked tirelessly. As a result the troops generally held the enigmatic, cloaked figure in considerable awe. As often with eccentrics, however, he was also a figure of fun. The war correspondent G.A. Henty, later to thrill millions of schoolboys with his historical adventure stories, had difficulty in stifling his mirth when speaking to Speedy. "His appearance, although no doubt very imposing to the native mind, is yet extremely comic to a European eye. Imagine a gentleman six feet and a half high, wearing a red handkerchief over his head and round his neck the fur collar with tails of a chief's insignia; over his shoulders is the native white cloth wrapping, with red ends. Below this is a long coloured silk garment; and below all this the British trousers and boots."

But if Speedy did at times resemble a musical-comedy brigand, there was no belittling his contribution to the expedition. Throughout February, 1868 he worked tirelessly to bring Napier and one of Theodore's local foes, Prince Kassai of Tigré, together for a meeting. That the two men eventually concluded a pact against Theodore and swore eternal friendship was in no small part due to his tact, diplomacy and command of language.

There was a price to pay. While waiting to escort the Prince to Napier's camp, Speedy was regaled with a dish of half-baked bread, swimming in an evil-smelling fat. "While endeavouring to find a morsel less saturated with fat than the rest," Henty reported, "two or three of the chiefs showed him how the food should be eaten, by thrusting some exceedingly dirty hands into the mess, rolling up a large ball, and cramming it into his mouth."

In the last few days before the crucial Battle of Arogi, Speedy visited as many villages as he could, allaying fears that Napier had come to shore up Theodore's odious rule. During the battle, he confined himself to the role of observer. After it was over, he picked his way through the littered field, assuring grief-stricken women that they could remove their dead and wounded without harassment from the British.

Having shattered Theodore's army, Napier was impatient to press home the attack on Magdala and he sent Speedy galloping off with 50 Indian cavalrymen to persuade Theodore's dispirited warriors to clear the approaches to the fortress. With no stomach for another fight, they accepted his suggestion and streamed away into the valleys. Speedy rode on hard towards the forbidding bastion. Suddenly Theodore and a band of warriors burst out of its gates and tried to drag in cannon from the artillery park. But Speedy thundered forward with his detachment of cavalry, captured the guns and drove the Emperor back into the fort. Then with supreme coolness he loaded the weapons and turned them on the foe, preparing the way for Napier's assault. Within half an hour Magdala had fallen and Theodore was dead.

Speedy's last known mission was to escort Theodore's Queen and her son out of the blazing fortress. Then, in a fitting end to his colourful, unconventional career, he vanished from recorded history. His fate has never been discovered.

the gap in the wall the defenders turned and fled for the upper defences. Losing no time, Bergin's party rushed forward in hot pursuit and managed to prevent their adversaries from closing the second set of gates. Another party helped the main body penetrate the obstinate lower gate, and soon the 33rd was inside the fortress.

Magdala had fallen, and to set the seal on the victory, the Emperor was found dead a short distance within the inner gate. At the moment when it became clear that all was lost, he had turned to his gun-bearer, Welder Gabre, and said: "Flee. I release you from your allegiance; as for me, I shall never fall into the hands of an enemy." Then, drawing a pistol – ironically one of those originally presented by Queen Victoria – he shot himself through the mouth and fell dead instantly. With the death of their leader most of his men were only too willing to lay down their arms. The colours of the 33rd were lashed to the top of the highest roof in the fortress.

The Commander-in-Chief could congratulate himself on achieving both the main purposes of his expedition. The captives were safe and their persecutor lay slain at the cost of only 15 wounded.

The last days at Magdala were not uneventful. There were 265 native prisoners to liberate – including no less than 36 Abyssinian princes and senior chieftains, some of whom had been incarcerated for as many as 30 years. A board of inquiry looked into Theodore's death, and the Emperor's body was buried.

Then it was necessary to protect the inhabitants of Magdala and the disarmed warriors of Theodore's ex-army from the vengeful and loot-lusting Gallas tribesmen. Severe regulations had to be issued to stop the troops of the expedition from doing a little scavenging on their own account. Living conditions around and in Magdala were tough, for the shortage of water within the fortress was almost as dire as in the surrounding countryside, and so everybody was pleased when on April 15, after two days of occupation, Sir Robert Napier ordered preparations for the return march to Zula.

Two days later the Engineers destroyed the 15 smooth-bore cannon (three of them 56-pounders), 13 howitzers and nine mortars captured at Islamgee or within Magdala. Charges were then placed beneath the fortifications of Magdala, and fire was set to every building on the plateau before the rearguard evacuated the area. As the long column of troops, accompanied by tens of thousands of Theodore's ex-subjects, including his Queen, who had to be escorted beyond the grasp of their hated Gallas foes, wended its way down the King's Road for the last time, they left behind them a massive column of smoke ascending into the sky – testimony to the folly of twisting the British lion's tail.

Now began the march back to the coast. When the rearguard reached Senafé, Napier held a last series of meetings with his erstwhile ally, Prince Kassai of Tigré, who came to the conference clearly expecting great rewards. He received half a dozen mortars and as many howitzers, with 200 rounds for each piece, together with 850 muskets, 350,000 rounds of small arms' ammunition and 28 barrels of gunpowder, besides numerous other articles. In presenting these not inconsiderable munitions of war, Sir Robert somewhat hopefully stressed that they were solely for use "in the defence of his country." The Prince was also promised delivery of several mountain guns at some future date. All in all, these "gifts" left Kassai the strongest war-lord in Abyssinia, and inevitably heralded another series of desperate civil wars as their owner battled for paramountcy against his fellow rulers.

It is revealing that Napier's mandate included no clear directions for reorganizing the chaotic political condition of the country he had just traversed. The liberated chiefs were advised to give some form of allegiance to Kassai – but in other respects nothing was done to assure a settled future for the country. Napier's political masters had no desire to incur the least responsibility for the region; the expedition had achieved its specific purposes, and that was enough.

By June 2 all the troops were in the Zula encampments. The only thought in men's minds now was to get away as soon as possible, and everything that could be moved or dismantled was hectically

Theodore's son Alamayu was taken to Britain soon after the fall of Magdala and sent to school at Rugby. He died at 18 without ever returning to his own land and was buried in St. George's Chapel, Windsor.

packed aboard ship. Even the defective locomotives, rolling-stock and rusting rails of the railway were re-embarked, and when the last men were aboard there were few traces left of the vast encampment.

For a while Victorian England basked in the success of its soldiers. "We landed at Portsmouth about the 20th June," recalled an Ensign, Wynter, who had carried the colours of the 33rd into Magdala. "All the ships in harbour and at Spithead were dressed and manned, and bands were placed on Southsea and other piers and played *Home Sweet Home* and *See the Conquering Hero Come*. A tremendous crowd were in the streets who chaffed our ragged clothes, and one big woman took my Captain, a very little man, in her arms and kissed him, much to his fury. It was funny to see his struggles."

The mood of relief and rejoicing did not, however, linger long in high places. Very soon awkward questions were being raised in both Houses of Parliament about the cost of the expedition – almost double the original estimate. A Select Committee was appointed to examine the conduct of the Abyssinian expedition in the greatest detail.

On the whole, the home government backed Napier to the hilt. Sir Robert was promoted and raised to the peerage as Lord Napier of Magdala. He had earned it. To take a force of 13,000 men and numerous supporters to a virtually unknown land, march 400 miles through unmapped, roadless, arid and mountainous country and then defeat a demented monarch in his inaccessible fortress, and at the same time effect the release of the hostages, called for no little military skill and application. Every mule-load, every source of water, had to be carefully calculated; the whims of touchy local chieftains had to be allowed for and their willing support elicited; the discipline and well-being of his men among very difficult circumstances had to be carefully maintained.

What might have happened had a less capable and thorough soldier been in command is shown by the terrible fate of the Italian expedition in 1896, which was severely mauled at the Battle of Adowa by the same ferocious warriors that Napier had faced and defeated. Whereas the Italians lost no less than 6,000 killed and 1,700 wounded in this single action, the total deaths among the British troops throughout the whole nine-month expedition of 1867–68 amounted to exactly 35 (about 1·3 per cent of the British contingent) – all from wounds or disease, and none actually in action – and only a further 333 were seriously wounded or afflicted by illness. The losses incurred among the Indian troops and followers were somewhat higher, but not dramatically so. No one could have expected a lower rate of mortality. And yet, all goals had been achieved. "Though a little war, it was a great campaign," wrote H.M. Stanley in a just summary. "The fame of it resounded with loud reverberations over wide Asia and established her [Britain's] prestige on a firmer base than ever." The honour of Britain had been vindicated, and the martial qualities of the post-Crimean and post-Mutiny army had been tested and not found wanting.

However, the deeper lessons of policy and statecraft were soon being pointed out in the columns of the more influential newspapers and periodicals. The Editor of the *Illustrated London News* put his finger on the real issue at stake. "We must learn a lesson for ourselves, as well as impress one upon others. We have been taught by costly experience how necessary it is to keep ourselves clear from political contact with nations that are not yet sufficiently advanced in civilisation to conform to the canons of international good faith and decorous demeanour. We have been too much in the habit of leaving the contingency of peace or war in the hands of subordinates, naturally overzealous in magnifying their office and their personal importance at our risk. There was no conceivable need for our setting down a Consul on the African side of the Red Sea. Government will, we trust, be chary in future in opening consular stations at out-of-the-way places, and will firmly resist being dragged into political relations with barbarous chieftains. We can ill-afford a perpetual succession of 'little wars.' We have no right to expect that they will all end as fortunately as, thanks to Sir Robert Napier and his gallant army, the war in Abyssinia has ended."

This plea for non-involvement proved a very pious hope. In the next 30 years the British were to fight a mass of "little wars," many in Africa. The style of the future was imperial involvement on a scale that made the Abyssinian expedition look positively light-hearted.

In a modern Abyssinian mural Theodore prepares to die. Napier, incongruously dressed in 20th-Century uniform, pays somewhat premature last respects.

Fashionable "flapper" clothes for day wear, 1927